
The Concept of Self-Identity and Moral Conflicts

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Summary

This paper examines the concept of self-identity as a factor that influences agents' choices in moral conflicts. The main questions it concerns itself with are whether there is a connection between self-identity and reasoning in moral dilemmas and, given the strong reasons to believe that such a connection exists, how we should most properly understand self-identity. I examine some of the most notable recent contributions on the topic of personal identity, those of Sandel and Taylor, and find them wanting because of their one-sided interpretation of identity. I follow Rorty and Wong in arguing for a more heterogeneous concept of self-identity, which would respect the various diverse sources of personal identification. After discussing briefly the types and sources of moral conflict, the paper examines two widely accepted accounts of reasoning in moral dilemmas, the position of particularist rationality and the quasi-existentialist position. This is done with reference to the two main issues of interest here, the extent to which these accounts acknowledge the importance of self-identity for moral conflict reasoning, and the plausibility of their conceptions of personal identity. The Aristotelian position of contextual reasoning is deemed unsatisfactory because it does not include considerations of self-identity among the resources for resolving the hard choices, and because it suffers from certain conceptual flaws. The quasi-existentialist approach to reasoning in moral conflicts pays more attention to agents' self-identifications. However, it is found unconvincing because it focuses solely on one aspect of the agent's heterogeneous identity, arguing that adopting a holistic view of one's life requires choosing in line with the kind of person one wants to become. Conversely, this paper argues that agents can maintain the feeling that their choices are connected to one another by consistently choosing in line with any of their diverse identifications.

Key words: self, self-identity, self-interpretation, moral conflicts, incommensurability, moral reasoning



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1. Introduction

The first assumption implied by the title of this paper is that the concept of moral conflict represents a viable concept in ethical theory, which is an assumption that is contested by such respectable ethical theories as Kantianism and utilitarianism. I shall, however, take the existence of moral conflicts as given and explore the possible connections between self-identity and reasoning in an ethical reality that allows moral conflicts. This statement brings us to the next assumption adopted in this paper, which is that reasoning in situations of moral conflicts constitutes a type of moral reasoning. If this is so, then an examination of the role of self-identity in a special instantiation of moral reasoning, i.e. reasoning in moral conflicts, has to build on an analysis of the status of identity in moral reasoning in general. The discussion in this paper will follow this guideline. Now, it seems that a full analysis of the role of self-identity in moral reasoning in general would have to consist of at least three steps: first, it would have to examine whether there is a connection between considerations of self-identity and moral reasoning; second, it would have to provide a plausible definition of self-identity that enters our moral deliberations; and third, it would have to specify exactly how considerations of self-identity influence our moral choices. The scope of this paper's discussion of issues related to self-identity and moral reasoning is limited, and its aim is not to give such a comprehensive account of the connections between the two. Due to the constraints of this paper's format, I shall only deal with the first two of the mentioned analytical steps without trying to answer in what ways identity works to determine our moral choices.

These issues will be explored in the first part of this paper, which will serve as a preparation for the more specific discussion of the status of identity in cases of moral conflict that will follow. Agents' reasoning in moral conflicts will be examined in a similar fashion to the way in which I shall explore moral reasoning in general, in that it will be concerned only with answering the following questions: "Do the accepted accounts acknowledge the influence of self-identity on reasoning in moral conflicts?", and "Are their interpretations of self-identity in line with the heterogeneous conception that is favoured in this paper?". I will go on to examine two views of how agents resolve moral dilemmas, the view of particularist reasoning, inspired by Aristotle, and the quasi-existentialist view.

One more remark is in order here. The focus of this paper is on moral conflicts experienced by individuals, which rules out, firstly, dealing with the issue of how societies collectively make choices in situations of moral conflict. Secondly, this also means that we will not be looking into conceptual moral conflicts, that is, conflicts among different kinds of moral claim, since they are not directly experienced by individuals.

2. *Self-Identity and Moral Reasoning*

2.1. *The concept of self-identity*

There seem to exist two distinct ways of looking into matters of personal identity, or self-identity. The first of these is from the standpoint of metaphysics, which involves examining issues such as persistence of the self and the metaphysical status of human beings, and questions like “What does our existence consist of?” The metaphysical perspective on personal identity stresses the importance of identity, thus understood, for moral agency by stating that understanding what kind of beings we are helps determine how we ought to live. There are, however, two problems with this way of connecting identity and morality. First, it seems to conflate two notions: of what humans are, and of what is good for them, attempting to draw moral prescriptions from the metaphysical “essence” of being human. However, the claim that the actuality of human existence, when fully grasped, can provide the answer to how people should live is not as incontestable as it may seem. Another problem with the metaphysical approach is that it produces a very thin account of personal identity, abstracting from the richness of agents’ inner lives and the context within which their identities are constituted. Due to its analytic detachment, this approach comes close to losing sight of real human subjects.

The second approach to self-identity, advocated by theorists like Michael Sandel and Charles Taylor, asserts that any ethical system developed on the basis of statements about such a truncated self is necessarily impoverished because it distorts our lives beyond recognition. Our philosophical concept of self-identity has to be thicker in order to be applicable because “it is this more robust sense of identity that we seek to capture when we aim at self-understanding, when we attempt to engage and comprehend others, and when we make judgments about character, worth, and responsibility” (Flanagan and Rorty, 1990: 3).

What is, then, self-identity in this more robust interpretation? This question comprises at least two sub-questions: “What does it mean for an agent to have self-identity?”, and “What are the sources of one’s self-identity?”¹ They are closely linked but for the sake of the present discussion I shall try to separate them and examine at this point the former, returning to the latter in the next section. First of all, it has to be said that a sense of identity is not a part of our natural physiological constitution, which is to say that “we are not selves in the way that we are organisms, or we don’t have selves in the way we have hearts and livers” (Taylor, 1990: 34). It is quite possible to imagine a human being that wouldn’t possess the developed image of her unique self that we normally call identity: presumably, we could expect to find this in a child raised by wild animals, without any contact with humans. Having a sense of identity, then, differs from having a heart or a liver in that it is constituted by our own efforts. Man is a “self-interpreting animal” (Taylor, 1994: 189), which is also why it is more accurate to say that

¹ Another question related to these issues is certainly “How does one become aware of one’s self-identity?”, which would require looking into the self-interpretative processes through which one gains self-knowledge and establishes links of identification with sources of one’s identity, such as social roles, group membership and so on. This is certainly an interesting topic but I cannot pursue it further here.

identity is *developed* through self-reflection, instead of being firmly fixed at any point in time.

More substantively, it can be said that the notion of concrete identity discussed here differs from identity in the metaphysical sense insofar as it refers to the identity of particular agents rather than the identity of humans *qua* humans. Since identity in the former sense is not only personal but also personalized, it involves developing a particular image of one's unique self that is not comprised in the concept of metaphysical identity. Concrete identity can be understood as pertaining to the traits that make an agent who she is, foremost in her own eyes; it "reflects the whole structure of her character, the traits that are central to her capacities for agency" (Flanagan and Rorty, 1990: 3). Identity traits influence moral reasoning because in order for an obligation to make sense to an individual she ultimately has to define herself as the addressee of that same obligation. Moreover, it can be plausibly argued that self-identity sets limits to what the agent considers imaginable or viable: even in situations of radical choice "that choice requires self-knowledge, for surely... one cannot become just anyone one chooses to be" (Putnam, 1990: 74). Therefore, exploring moral reasoning without paying due attention to the way it is influenced by agents' identifications, the reverse relation also holding, doesn't seem justified. Having examined the more robust notion of identity and its connection with agents' moral deliberations, we shall now turn our attention to the question of which traits should be regarded as central to an agent's identity, or the question of sources of self-identification.

2.2. Sources of self-identity

2.2.1. Sandel's situated self

Political and moral philosophers have attempted to incorporate their conceptions of personal identity into broader schemes of moral agency. A notable recent contribution in this field has been that of Michael Sandel, most clearly articulated in his *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*. His views can be interpreted as a direct reaction to, and criticism of, John Rawls' understanding of the moral self in *A Theory of Justice*.² I shall, therefore, first present Rawls' view of the moral subject as an antecedently individuated self, constituted without reference to any particular ends. This will be followed by an examination of Sandel's objections and of his conception of the self as formed through pursuit of certain shared goals.

The most fundamental feature of Rawls' moral subject is that it does not owe its identity to any ends, which is a reflection of his position that "in justice as fairness the concept of right is prior to that of the good" (Rawls, 1973: 31). Desires and their objects are not constitutive of our identity, which is the same as saying that we do not normally regard ourselves as mere sums of our ends. Individuals change through the courses of

² Sandel criticised three main features of Rawls' moral subject: its detachment from any ends, its plurality, and its inability to access others subjects' minds. I shall only examine the first Sandel's criticism as it seems to be the most relevant for the present discussion, for two reasons: first, it is the most fundamental of the three, and second, it makes the most direct claims about the sources of personal identity.

their lifetimes as do their conceptions of what is good for them, but this does not mean that their entire personalities change. The relation between ends and the self can best be understood as possession: ends are of a person, not the person itself. As Sandel's interpretation suggests (Sandel, 1982: 8), Rawls also seems to be employing a conceptual argument to back up his understanding of the self, which consists in saying that we could not imagine self-knowledge without postulating the existence of a stable antecedently individuated self.

Sandel proposes quite a different approach to understanding the moral subject, building on the contention that the good is essential for the formation and cultivation of one's identity. He regards Rawls' perspective incoherent because it deprives the subject of attributes that are indispensable for any agency. In his criticism of the first feature of Rawls' moral subject, Sandel contends that ends make one who one is and that there is no self-definition without a notion of what one wants to achieve. We become aware of our unique personalities and capacities, he argues, through pursuit of goals that rank as valuable in our conception of the good. It is not only that the individual cannot be thought immune to influences from her social context; for Sandel, she is radically situated, that is, her identity is shaped by her ends and social environment. On the conceptual level, he argues that the self-reflection Rawls invokes is not true self-reflection at all, first, because an antecedently given self cannot *a posteriori* be revised in the light of reflection and, second, because it would consist of contingent attributes that cannot properly be regarded a subject of deep introspection (Sandel, 1982: 160-161).

It can be unclear how one can come to possess certain goals if not by choosing them. Sandel's answer is that the way one comes by her ends should best be understood as discovering them. In order for that to be possible there must exist a set of goals that are prior to the individual and within which she can situate herself, which is where Sandel turns to the concept of communal ends. He sees human agency as a sort of dialogical relation of the individual with shared communal conceptions of the good, which consists in finding one's place within this framework of shared values, as well as trying to best harmonize them with the present needs and circumstances.

Sandel seems to be justified in criticizing Rawls' view of the moral subject as the latter leaves us with an extremely thin core of the self, incapable of moral agency because it is deprived of any frame of reference. The way in which such a self is constituted is also quite mysterious, since its foundations exist prior to any projects and ends, which is why Sandel rightly refers to Rawls' conception as "voluntaristic". Many of Sandel's own assertions possess a high degree of plausibility, especially his account of the connectedness of the self to its social environment. However, there is a sense in which his whole conception of the moral self overestimates the social component of persons' identities. While it is true that one's partaking in certain communal conceptions of the good can represent a significant aspect of one's identity, there is surely much more to be said about self-identity. An individual has resources at her disposal to rationally scrutinize the societal understanding of the good life, and if she finds it wanting she has the capacity to change how she stands in relation to it. Not all aspects of one's identity flow from the communal vision of the good; on the contrary, "many of us have deep moral reservations about the very structures that have traditionally defined identity" (Rorty and Wong, 1990: 30). For example, the self-perception and projects of

a physically disabled person can clash with what a traditionalist society expects from that person.

Therefore, it seems that the conception of self-identity should be broadened to include more than the social component. In the text that follows I shall examine Charles Taylor's account of self-identity as constituted primarily by the self's rational inward-directed reflection on its desires and attachments.

2.2.2. Taylor and strong evaluation

We have seen how Sandel attempts to establish the centrality of social conceptions of the good life to the individuals' self-identification and, in turn, their capacities for moral agency. Charles Taylor also wishes to connect matters of "concrete" personal identity that is thicker than in the Rawlsian interpretation to the way we practically deliberate on moral issues. However, the main focus of his analysis and the conclusions he reaches are very different to Sandel's and can, in fact, provide grounds for a critique of social identity. Taylor builds on the work of Harry Frankfurt in at least two respects: first, he adopts Frankfurt's distinction between first and second-order desires, and second, he argues that strong or second-order evaluation lays the foundations of an agent's identity, which echoes Frankfurt's argument from *The Importance of What We Care About*. I shall now look in more detail into the way Taylor develops these themes and examine the plausibility of his account of self-identity.

Taylor employs Frankfurt's well-known distinction between first- and second-order desires (Frankfurt, 1988a: 12) as a basis for drawing the distinction between strong and weak evaluation. Second-order desires involve reflection that is qualitatively different from and higher than reflecting on how to satisfy simple wants to have or do things, as this means evaluating desires themselves and deeming some of them "better", "nobler" or "more fulfilling" than others. The concept of first- and second-order desires is reflected to a great extent in Taylor's notion of weak and strong evaluation: "Whereas a reflection about what we feel like more, which is all a simple weigher can do in assessing motivations, keeps us as it were at the periphery; a reflection on the kind of beings we are takes us to the center of our existence as agents." (Taylor, 1977: 114-115). As Flanagan notes, Taylor's weak evaluator can make qualitative assessments but they "either do not involve her own motives, desires, and inclinations, or if they do, they involve only non-ethical assessment of these motives, desires, and inclinations" (Flanagan, 1990: 39). Furthermore, it has to be noted that when painting strong evaluators as persons making ethical assessments of their desires, Taylor refers to a relatively broad understanding of the ethical, which includes not only concern for obligations and rights, but also a wide range of intrapersonal concerns – how one should live, what one should care about, and so on.

The final step in Taylor's account of the self is arguing that the agent's identity is defined by her fundamental strong evaluations: "[T]he claim is that living within such strongly qualified horizons is constitutive of human agency, that stepping outside these limits would be tantamount to stepping outside what we would recognize as integral, that is, undamaged human personhood." (Taylor, 1990: 27) This passage seems to echo

Frankfurt's idea that identity is constituted by what we care most about, or that "a person who cares about something is, as it were, invested in it" (Frankfurt, 1988b: 83).

It is now time to ask whether Taylor's understanding of personal identity can be considered more compelling than Sandel's account of the socially situated self. Taylor starts from a very plausible assumption, which is that one's plans, projects, and commitments can have a major influence on one's self-perception. However, there are two sets of objections that can be raised against his views: one concerning the way he develops this underlying idea, and another concerning the scope of his conclusions. Firstly, one might follow Flanagan in noting (Flanagan, 1990: 53-54) that Taylor's picture of the self appears overly intellectualist, not allowing for identity in people whose lives are driven by certain cares and commitments but who are inarticulate about them. Secondly, his strong focus on the ethical nature of strong evaluations does not seem justified: one could, after all, imagine an admirable person with a fully developed personal identity that would be guided by a variety of non-ethical concerns. An objection of another sort would concede the validity of many of Taylor's points concerning ideal identity but state that it neglects other aspects of agents' identities. The self-perception of, say, a physically handicapped person can be strongly shaped not only by her image of the fully realized person she would like to become but also by her social environment's perception and, in some cases, negative expectations of her. In this sense, "if practical deliberation attempts to change the actual in favor of the ideal, it must pay attention to the ways in which the ideal is constrained by the intractable" (Rorty and Wong, 1990: 31). Therefore, Taylor's one-sided interpretation, which focuses solely on the self's capacity for ethical evaluation of its first-order desires remains unsatisfactory, calling for a broader exploration of self-identity. This will be discussed in the text that follows.

2.2.3. Heterogeneous self-identity

The main weakness of Sandel's and Taylor's accounts of personal identity, as we have seen, is that they portray only one constituent of personal identity as fundamental, while neglecting the importance of certain others. A more realistic perspective has to acknowledge that there are many possible sources of identification, none of which necessarily takes precedence over others in general. This can be taken to mean at least two things: firstly, that in a given society different individuals can exhibit different patterns of self-identification. Some may think of themselves primarily in terms of their membership of a certain national community; others may think that what mostly constitutes their identity is striving to become a particular kind of person, such as kind, honest or caring; still others may think that their social role, like that of a teacher or a human rights activist, is what best defines them. But, secondly, the claim about the heterogeneity of self-identity also means that personal self-identifications are not firmly fixed and they that can shift through the course of individuals' lives. Someone who sees herself as a punk-rocker in her youth can become, say, completely immersed in her job as a City investment banker later in life.

Rorty and Wong have offered an interesting account of personal identity that recognizes its heterogeneity and pays attention to its various social and psychological aspects. They start from the claim already advanced here, that "a person's identity is constituted

by a configuration of central traits” (Rorty and Wong, 1990: 19), which are those traits “that typically make a systematic difference to the course of a person’s life, to the habit-forming and action-guiding social categories in which she is placed, to the way that she acts, reacts, and interacts” (Rorty and Wong, 1990: 19).

They suggest the following as the traits constituent of self-identity, in a roughly psychogenetic developmental order: somatic dispositions, temperamental or psychological traits, social role identity, socially defined group identity, and ideal identity. Bodily dispositions (as muscularly strong or weak, quick or sluggish, slender or heavy) are one of the first sources of a child’s self-identification and often retain their importance throughout a person’s life because social norms portray many somatic qualities as desirable or undesirable, which affects their bearers’ self-definition. Because this is so, they can also affect a person’s beliefs and plans. Central temperamental or psychological traits, such as aggression or friendliness, trustfulness or distrustfulness, can also be said to shape one’s sense of self-identity, in that they can often induce the development of certain motives and habits while deterring others, so that, for instance, a shy person can be expected to avoid social interaction and develop the self-image of a recluse. Cultural narratives, popular songs and stories also normally deliver ready-made images of most psychological dispositions, with reference to which agents orient themselves. Another powerful source of self-identification can be social roles, by which Rorty and Wong mean not only the roles defined by established institutions and practices (such as family and occupational roles), but also those provided by social narratives (such as the roles of “the villain”, “the big brother” and “the rebel”). It is not uncommon to see a person adopting the behaviour and attitudes attached to her role of, say, a professional soldier, as a part of her self-understanding and then exhibiting these traits in spheres of life that are not directly related to the role itself, such as parental or romantic relationships. As multiculturalist and feminist theorists readily emphasize, membership of a social group can generate strong feelings of solidarity and identification with the group on the part of its members, so that one can see oneself primarily as an Italian, or a Muslim, or a homosexual. Finally, a persuasive account of the patterns of self-identification has to allow for the agents’ creative impulse and their capacity for second-order evaluation of their desires, whether we understand this evaluation as purely ethical in nature, as Taylor seems to, or as comprising non-ethical considerations as well. An individual’s life can revolve around her efforts to become morally worthier, more sophisticated, or more rational, to the extent that she identifies her personality with striving to meet these standards. The various traits and dispositions listed here combine in a unique way to constitute a singular configuration of a person’s self-identity, and even though they can be seen as independent, they are often mutually reinforcing, constraining, or conflicting.

3. Moral Conflicts

We have so far explored the role of self-identity in moral reasoning in general, which is necessary if one wants to inquire about the importance of identity in a specific instantiation of moral reasoning, that in cases of moral conflict. The latter issue is this paper’s main point of interest, but in order to make any conclusions about it we now have to examine in some detail the types and sources of moral conflict. It is beyond the

scope of this paper to present a defence of the category of moral conflict against ethical theories that deny its viability, although it seems to me that a lot can be said in its favour. Instead, I will here take the existence of moral dilemmas as given and examine their structure, discussing the role of self-identity in an ethical reality that allows conflicts in the next section.

On Lukes' account, there are four forms of moral conflict: first, conflict of obligations; second, conflict between ends, or goals; third, conflict between moral codes, or worldviews; and lastly, that between different kinds of moral claim (Lukes, 1989: 129-132).³ Probably the most widely discussed example of moral conflict, that of Sartre's pupil having to decide whether to join the Free French Forces in order to help defend his country or to stay alongside his elderly mother, is a case of conflicting obligations. Moral conflict between ends, or goals, is experienced, for instance, by an agent that has to choose between leading a slow and somewhat routine life without much stress and having a more dynamic and diverse lifestyle, but at the cost of a faster pace and much stress. Conflict between moral codes, or worldviews, is "marked by incompatibilities of perception and belief" (Lukes, 1989: 130), and refers mainly to the differing conceptions of good and bad in different communities. The disagreement between the Muslim community and the British liberal majority over the free distribution of Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* was an example of such a conflict. Finally, different kinds of moral claim, such as deontological and consequentialist, conflict on the conceptual level because they make irreconcilable moral requirements, such as to maximize overall utility and to respect individual rights at the same time. Of these four forms of moral conflict, only the first three fall into the category of conflicts experienced by individuals, which is the focus of this paper. In the rest of the discussion I will, consequently, not refer to conflicts on the deeper conceptual level.

The monist view that all goods or values can be subsumed under some overarching value or principle, is a fundamental constituent of many well-established ethical theories, including the Kantian and utilitarian. In opposition to these conceptions, some philosophers have in the last fifty years or so begun to take seriously the idea that persons can sometimes be confronted with conflicts of values that are radically diverse and incompatible. This feature of the moral life is especially emphasized in the works of theorists that subscribe to the position of value pluralism, whose basic tenet, on Larmore's account, is that "there are many viable conceptions of the good life that neither represent different versions of some single, homogeneous good nor fall into any discernible hierarchy" (Larmore, 1987: 23). The pluralist view is that moral values, norms, ideals, duties and virtues are irreducibly diverse; the view that "the world that we encounter in ordinary experience is one in which we are faced with choices between ends equally ultimate, and claims equally absolute, the realisation of some of which must inevitably involve the sacrifice of others" (Berlin, 2002: 213-214).

³ When discussing value conflicts most theorists of value pluralism use the term "values" to refer to both obligations and ends, although the term "values" can, in a narrower interpretation, signify just ends, or goals. In this paper I am following the practice of pluralist philosophers and using "values" as a broader category that comprises obligations and ends.

The claim that values are plural opens the door to the possibility of conflicts because more than one of such values can pertain to some situation of choice. But the plurality of values alone is insufficient to produce moral conflicts that we would characterize as “hard” or “tragic”. What makes our choices so difficult is that values are not only plural but also incommensurable, or so value pluralists argue. As Crowder notes, there are three ways of interpreting this claim: it can mean that values are incomparable, immeasurable, or unrankable (Crowder, 2002: 49-54). Of these three notions, it is relatively least contestable that incommensurability involves immeasurability, which means that there is no common denominator, or currency, in which conflicting plural values can be expressed. The claim that incommensurability involves unrankability is stronger than the claim of immeasurability, stating that the heterogeneity of values entails that we cannot produce a consistent ranking of alternatives that would hold in general. Finally, the strongest interpretation of incommensurability states that values are incomparable, similar to the way in which tea and beer, or Aeschylus and Shakespeare in Gray’s example (Gray, 1995: 51), are incomparable. Values like justice and friendship, it can be argued, have very different motivational force as they appeal to different aspects of one’s personality; therefore, trying to compare them would be like trying to compare two different worlds that have nothing in common. This is why Raz contends that incomparability “marks the inability of reason to guide our action” (Raz, 1986: 334). As a conclusion, it can be said that irrespective of how we understand incommensurability, it appears to significantly hinder the capacity of our reason to provide a better case for one of the values in conflict.

4. *Moral Conflicts and Self-Identity*

The previous chapter has determined the specific obstacles that rational deliberation faces in situations of moral conflicts. However, many theorists argue that while it is true that having to compare incommensurable values seriously challenges our capacity to decide which of the options is better, we still somehow manage to make “nonarbitrary choices in these predicaments” (Taylor, 1997: 170). As Williams phrases it (Williams, 1973: 185), people normally have some reasons for choosing an *ought* over another, no matter how difficult the dilemma is. This is not to suggest that one of the *oughts* is eliminated in such situations: while thinking that she made the correct choice, the agent may at the same time feel genuine regret for failing to do what she also ought to have done. The first question is, then, “What grounds her belief that she did the right thing, despite the validity of the two *oughts*?”, which is the same as asking “What counts as the better option when both are good in a sense?”⁴ The second question to be posed here is: “Is there a connection between the justifications of choices among plural values and considerations of self-identity?”. One approach to moral conflict reasoning holds that the resources for making a rational choice are provided by context, while the quasi-existentialist approach focuses on the holistic picture of one’s life.

⁴ The flipside of this question is, of course, “What counts as the less bad option when both are bad in a sense?”, which can also be asked in many situations of moral conflict. For the sake of simplicity I only discuss choices among options that are good in a sense, although it can be presumed that similar claims could be made about the case of incomparably bad options.

4.1. Particularist reasoning

Some philosophers argue that a good acquaintance with the context of choice enables us to rationally resolve hard dilemmas because “specification of context reveals the values that are most important to us, hence the values that guide choice” (Crowder, 2002: 57-58). Thus, Nussbaum insists in the Aristotelian vein that practical reasoning is always and necessarily particularist, so that while no general rules can be formulated to apply to all cases of ethical judgement, the person of practical wisdom is able to find the best course of action in any particular case (Nussbaum, 1990: 59). Choices among values are qualitative rather than quantitative. The proper understanding of the context enables us to make these qualitative choices because it elucidates, on Crowder’s account (Crowder, 2002: 60-62), the facts and values that are relevant to the choice. Certain facts set limits to what can be chosen, in line with the slogan “ought implies can”. Another constituent of choice are the agent’s values, that is, her background conception of the good, which serves as a standard for deciding what matters to her in the circumstances.

The position of particularist reasoning offers a good critique of the view that stresses maximization as the rational standard, in that it rightly points to the fact that in the circumstances of moral conflict people normally choose an alternative for what it means to them and not for the consequences it will produce. However, it has to be deemed unsatisfactory because of its apparent disregard for the way considerations of self-identity influence personal choices in moral conflicts. On the Aristotelian view, the only resource for resolving hard moral dilemmas available to the agent is knowledge of the facts and values that are relevant to choice. In fact, it is quite plausible to maintain that deliberation on one’s self-image represents another such resource. This can be said for at least two reasons: first, the agent’s self-definition at least partly shapes her view of which obligations refer to her in some specific situation, and second, options that conflict with one’s self-identity are seen by the agent as non-viable, or unthinkable.

There is also a sense in which this account of reasoning in moral conflicts insufficiently explains the actual process of deliberation and what it is guided by. If practical wisdom consists in choosing what is right with regard to the context, then saying that one should choose among incomparable values as a person of practical wisdom would be true by definition, but is not very helpful. Another feature of this interpretation that renders it unsatisfactory is its unclarity: it does not give an unambiguous account of the considerations of the good that are to serve as the basis for choosing among viable options. More specifically, it is not clear what level of deliberation about the good this conception has in mind, as it can be argued that agents experience the value of a specific friendship relationship differently from the value of friendship in their life in general. It seems that the Aristotelian view has to refer to the more holistic interpretation of the good in contextual reasoning, because it is precisely the conflict on the level of specific values that characterizes hard moral dilemmas. On this point the Aristotelian perspective seems to strongly converge with the next interpretation of reasoning in cases of value conflict, the quasi-existentialist, without expressly acknowledging it. I shall now, therefore, discuss the distinction between different kinds of reasoning about values in some detail, and examine how theorists like Charles Taylor and John Gray make use of it in their quasi-existentialist accounts of practical deliberation.

4.2. *The quasi-existentialist approach and self-identity*

An important distinction that is often hinted at but rarely explicitly stated is that between reasoning about values, and reasoning about the way values relate to one another in the complete picture of one's life. When reasoning about values we are concerned with, first, our obligations and their justification, and second, with the identification of proper ends and of goods that are associated or conflicting with the pursuit of those ends (Becker, 1992: 711-712). Another sort of reasoning about the good consists in considering what is good from the perspective of one's whole life, rather than what is good in some specific circumstances. An option can be rationally very suited to some particular context and the agent's obligations and ends, and yet not get chosen if some other option is more in line with the general direction of the choices the agent has made in the past and intends to make in the future. As Taylor's puts it, there is an aspect of our sense of good and right that refers to how goods fit together in a whole life (Taylor, 1997: 179-180).

However, it is important not to overstate this point. It can reasonably be argued that people are guided in most of their everyday choices by the prospect of satisfaction of relatively immediate and palpable desires and interests. Putnam refers to this dimension of the ethical as the "normal moral life", in which choices are made "against a background of (relatively) stable values by a (relatively) stable character in more or less stable conditions and not very surprising situations" (Putnam, 1990: 72). This routine is at times interrupted by moments of crisis, moral dilemmas, when an individual can no longer rely on established values because these very values are in conflict with one another. Difficult cases of value conflict, such as whether to lie in order to help a friend, can provoke intense inner unsettlement, calling for a radical re-assessment of almost everything a person holds dear. Such situations require making a decision that is more fundamental than deciding whether we consider this or that person a friend, or whether this or that utterance is a lie: we must decide what place honesty and friendship have in our life, and will continue to have in the future. In such situations "we are called to choose the kind of life we mean to have" (Gray, 2000: 64-65).

The quasi-existentialist position seems to capture correctly the gravity and creativity contained in choices of the sort discussed here. It is, therefore, appropriate to explore whether and to what extent it fits with this paper's more general account of the role of self-identity in practical reasoning. The reader will recall the general line of my argument, which states that considerations of self-identity represent a significant factor that influences our practical reasoning. Hence, the questions to be asked now are: "Does the quasi-existentialist approach acknowledge the impact of concrete identity on agents' deliberation?", and "If so, how satisfactory is its account of self-identity as a factor in deliberation?". First off, Gray and Taylor's positions are strongly reminiscent of Taylor's concept of strong evaluation in that they claim that the agent chooses according to her vision of the kind of person she wants to become. These views are, then, an affirmation of the familiar thesis that self-identity influences personal choices, but self-identity of a special sort, completely directed towards the future. This can be recognized, for example, in Gray's claim that what a person in a moral dilemma confronts is "a choice of the self she means to be" (Gray, 2000: 65). Therefore, in response to the first question from above it can be said that the quasi-existentialist approach acknowledges the

importance of personal identity, but also that it contains two particular features: firstly, it claims that the agent's sense of self-identity is constituted by her own evaluative judgements of her desires and character, and secondly, it claims that this kind of identity fully determines her choices in value conflicts. These peculiarities bring us to the second question from above, the question of tenability of this conception's account of personal identity. Since this paper is not interested in examining exactly how self-identity influences agents' deliberations, it is not of our concern to assess the plausibility of the second feature from above. Regarding the first of these features, it is worth restating that the concept of ideal identity cannot be thought to capture the totality of agents' identifications. As was previously argued, a more realistic understanding of self-identity also includes such sources of self-definition as somatic dispositions, temperamental traits, social roles and group membership. This means that orientation with respect to the self one wants to become is not the only way in which a person can achieve consistency of her life choices. The agent can direct her choices to "fit together in a whole life" by opting consistently for the options that are, say, in line with her self-definition as a single parent, a homosexual, or a physically disabled person. She can, accordingly, try to resolve her moral dilemmas by persistently saying, "I shall act as any single parent would", or by invoking some other of her heterogeneous identifications.

I conclude that the quasi-existentialist view is more compelling than the position of particularist rationality in its treatment of the role of self-identity in moral conflicts, because it acknowledges the importance of self-image for moral choices, which the Aristotelian position does not do. However, this perspective has to be supplemented with the insight that self-identity refers to more than just one's vision of the traits and virtues one wishes to develop, including also the identifications arising from one's somatic dispositions, temperamental traits, social roles and group membership.

5. Conclusion

This paper has examined the concept of self-identity as a factor that has a bearing on agents' reasoning in moral conflicts. This has been done in connection with the more general issue of the role of self-identity in moral reasoning. The discussion has shown that considerations of self-identity influence our deliberation on moral issues in general, insofar as they inform the agent of her obligations in specific situations of choice, and help the agent discover the options that are "unthinkable" for her. A realistic perspective of self-identity should acknowledge the many possible sources of identification, none of which necessarily takes precedence over others in general. This means, first, that in a given society different individuals can exhibit different patterns of self-identification; and second, that personal self-identifications are not firmly fixed and they that can shift through the course of individuals' lives. In this respect, the account presented here differs sharply from one-dimensional conceptions of self-identity, such as Sandel's and Taylor's, which have been rejected because of their disregard for the diversity of personal identifications. After establishing the validity and content of the concept of self-identity in moral reasoning, this paper moved on to explore how the concept of self-identity applies to deliberating in moral conflicts. This was done with reference to two influential interpretations of rationality in moral conflicts: the Aristotelian position of

particularist reasoning and the view that focuses on the holistic picture of one's life. Our first aim was to assess the extent to which these accounts of reasoning in moral conflicts incorporate identity-related considerations. The Aristotelian perspective was found wanting in this regard, since it makes no mention of deliberation on one's self-image as a possible resource for resolving hard choices. In addition, careful examination reveals that it also contains certain conceptual weaknesses. These conclusions removed the contextual position from further discussion. Our second aim was to examine the tenability of the account that the remaining quasi-existentialist conception gives of self-identity. This conception's interpretation of self-identity was found unconvincing because orientation with respect to the self one wants to become is not the only way in which a person can achieve consistency of her life choices. One can also maintain the feeling that one's choices are mutually connected if one consistently chooses in line with some other of her diverse identifications, such as those related to one's group membership, or one's social role.

The role of self-identity in moral conflicts is a very engaging topic for philosophical investigation, but I could not aim to cover it entirely here. A more detailed study of the role of self-identity in moral conflicts would have to include a step which this discussion of the concept of self-identity has not made. This step would consist of explaining exactly how one's self definition influences one's choices in moral dilemmas, and would have to involve discussing such issues as what it means to attend to one's identity in hard choices, whether cultivation of one's identity is an end of some sort or a pre-evaluative disposition, whether one can choose to ignore the intimations of one's self-understanding, and the like. I presume that the examination of these issues would have to be considerably more comprehensive than my discussion here. However, I believe that this paper's conclusions about the moral status of agents' heterogeneous self-identifications can serve as a solid starting point for more detailed investigations of the role of identity in moral conflicts to be done in the future.

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